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AFGHANISTAN

SNAPSHOT

Noshaq is Back!

Tourism infrastructure has been repaired at Afghanistan's highest peak to facilitate a return of the mountaineering community



Photo: © Louis Meunier

"Afghans to the Top": Amriddin Sanger (L) and Malang Daria (R) at the summit of Noshaq in July 2009.

The rehabilitated trail infrastructure to Mount Noshaq has turned a grueling five-day ordeal into a pleasant three-day trek that safely navigates around minefields, and re-opens the peak to mountaineering expeditions.

Afghanistan's colossus is awakening after decades of neglect. Standing at 7,492 meters in the Hindu Kush Mountains of the Wakhan Corridor, Mount Noshaq is Afghanistan's highest peak.

Noshaq was popular among foreign mountaineers in the years between its first ascent in 1960 and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Chair of the British Mountaineering Club, Lindsay Griffin, who climbed the peak in 1977, states that Noshaq could be one of the most popular mountains in the world due to its elevation, the non-technical ascent route, and the stable summer weather.

After 1979, however, mountaineers stopped visiting the area because of Afghanistan's turmoil and landmines in the Noshaq Valley. With improved security since the fall of the Taliban, the peak is once again attracting attention from the international mountaineering community.

Three teams have summited Noshaq in recent years, and a number of others have failed. The first Afghans summited in 2009: Malang Daria and Amriddin Sanger, both from Wakhan. But the peak hadn't reached its tourism potential due to the difficult and dangerous access to base camp.

With the support of USAID, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and local communities have repaired the trail to the base camp and provided safe passage around the minefields.

The stage is now set for Noshaq to make its full return to tourism. To initiate this process, in August 2011, Anthony Simms, WCS Technical Advisor in Wakhan, and three other men will attempt to summit the peak (including Malang who'll be making his second summit). The team has been awarded The North Face/AG Outdoor Adventure Grant for 2011. This is providing high-profile media exposure to the expedition and will help launch the re-opening of Noshaq.

WCS anticipates the coming years will see a rapid influx of climbers back to Noshaq, returning the peak to notoriety. Malang is optimistic too: "This project will help make Noshaq famous again, and expeditions will bring a lot of money into our community. It will also help show the world that there's more to Afghanistan than just war."